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Portray CIA as a Threat; KGB as Harmless

# Australian Media Poison Relations with U.S.

By PETER SAMUEL

Australia is an ally hardly uppermost in American thinking, but it is nevertheless of considerable importance to the United States. It is an island continent providing a home to U.S. military communications facilities deemed indispensable to the U.S. nuclear submarine force and to other receiving stations related to satellite early warning and monitoring of Soviet systems.

Australia has strategically important minerals and forms a natural fall-back position for U.S. basing for Pacific and Indian Ocean operations, should there be problems in the Philippines. Moreover, there are deep political roots in the U.S.-Australian relationship.

Both societies derive their values from the same philosophical pool and have developed similar political institutions. In Australia the alliance is deeply anchored in the idea of America as defender-of-last-resort, since the United States is credited there with having saved Australia from Japanese occupation in 1942, when Britain was unable to come to Australia's assistance.

Australian soldiers fought by the side of Americans, not only in the Pacific war against Japan, but in Korea and Vietnam. Australian governments, both conservative (called Liberal) and Labor, have been generally pro-American in their foreign and defense policies. The current Hawke Labor government continues a broad support for the Western alliance, although there has recently been some friction in relations between the two countries over Australia's increasingly neutralist nuclear arms diplomacy. This is associated with Australian Foreign Minister Bill Hayden, sometimes more a rival than an ally of Prime Minister Robert Hawke.

Much more disturbing to supporters of the Western alliance in Australia is the more chronic problem of a steady slide in Australian public attitudes toward America, shaped in large part by a rampantly anti-American media there.

This virulent media anti-Americanism has many aspects. The quality of American life is constantly derided by a grotesque exaggeration of U.S. problems such as crime, drugs, race relations and poverty. U.S. national leadership is belittled by the caricature of President Reagan as a simpleminded

old ex-actor, liable at any minute to plunge the world into nuclear holocaust by "shooting from the hip" in the White House, as he once did in his heyday in B-grade movies.

Third, there is a constant preoccupation with supposed CIA misdeeds in Australia, despite the lack of any firm evidence of such, and the playing down of Soviet KGB activities. The greatest CIA scare in Australia followed a constitutional crisis in December 1975 in which the Labor government of Australia under Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was dismissed by the governor-general, Sir John Kerr.

As national political correspondent for the Australian weekly news-magazine, *The Bulletin*, through the 1970s, I followed the affair and its aftermath at close hand, and always thought it was fully explained as an event in which the governor-general acted alone, on his own convictions of his constitutional responsibilities (Whitlam was attempting to continue in government despite his inability to obtain a budget from an intransigent Senate). But the media gave constant credence to vague allegations, allusions and suggestions that the CIA was somehow involved in what was commonly described as a "coup" against the Whitlam Government.

These suggestions were based on the following skimpy facts. A senior CIA official in Canberra apparently rented a house owned by the deputy leader of the Australian Opposition. Fact two was that the CIA in Australia was upset immediately before his dismissal about Whitlam's use of this fact for partisan political point-scoring. Also introduced into the argument was the ancient history of the Australian governor-general's involvement during World War II, in intelligence activities, where undoubtedly he developed relations with U.S. intelligence.

More recently the rampant left-wingery of the big media in Australia has been evident in a sustained campaign to denigrate the Labor prime minister for acting to isolate a senior Canberra personality who was being recruited as a Soviet agent.

Known as "The Combe Affair," after David Combe (pronounced "Coom"), the Canberra lobbyist and Soviet agent in question, his isolation

by the government was treated by the Australian media as the major political issue for the country during much of the first two years of the Hawke Administration, 1983 through 1984. The fullest account of the media treatment of the Combe affair is by Robert Manne, a political science professor at Latrobe University, Melbourne, published in the October issue of the journal *Quadrant* (Australia's *Commentary* magazine, available at \$2.50 per issue, Box C344, Clarence Street P.O., Sydney 2000, Australia).

The facts of the case were that the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO), responsible for counter-intelligence, advised the Hawke Government that a prominent Canberra lobbyist, David Combe, was compromised by the KGB. Prime Minister Bob Hawke responded by requesting his Cabinet to keep Combe at arm's length, reducing his access as a lobbyist.

Combe was for seven years previous to becoming a lobbyist, national secretary of the Australian Labor party, and director of its national party office, a position equivalent to that of Frank Fahrenkopf in the Republican party. By dint of that close and long-standing party relationship with members of the government, he was before The Affair one of the Australian capital's best-placed lobbyists.

It quickly transpired that Combe had a very close relationship with the senior KGB officer in Canberra, Valeriy Ivanov, and in an inquiry into the affair (termed a Royal Commission) ASIO tape recordings of conversations between the two clearly established that the lobbyist was being recruited as a Soviet agent. He was being cultivated as a source of political intelligence and as an agent-of-influence, able to use his contacts and standing to more closely align Australian Labor party positions with Soviet policies.

It was also clear that the Soviets saw great potential in Ivanov as a channel

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of influence to leading Australian journalists. Combe was a longtime leading "leaker" to journalists on Labor party affairs.

In one conversation with the KGB man Ivanov, Combe said he believed "very fervently in Soviet-Australian relations." He made trips to Moscow, received presents from the Russians and developed a close personal friendship with the KGB officer. Combe spoke to the Russians of establishing for himself a "liaison" role in relations between the Soviet Communist party (CPSU) and the ALP, and sought funding for this from a trading company that had monopoly rights from the Soviets in handling Australian-Soviet trade.

The Royal Commission concluded that Combe's collaboration with the Soviets had "serious implications for national security." It stated that Ivanov had received instructions from "the highest level" in Moscow to ask Combe to work for the Soviet Union. The KGB had in Combe an extremely promising target, said the Commission.

The offer of "trading" work was a "bait" in the recruitment process, it reported, and the KGB hoped "to use Combe to obtain and hand over... information and documents illegitimately, and in the interests of the Soviet Union to act, wittingly or unwittingly as an agent of influence."

Combe knew Ivanov was probably a KGB officer and all the same responded enthusiastically to Ivanov's recruitment proposal. He cooperated with the Soviet officer's suggestion that they meet "in such a way as to avoid surveillance" by the Australian security service.

The Commission, which was headed by an eminent and independent-minded judge, knowledgeable in intelligence matters, concluded in favor of Prime Minister Hawke on all major issues of the affair. The security organization had acted properly in investigating the affair and reporting to the prime minister and he in turn had acted properly in seeking to distance his government from the compromised lobbyist.

Political science Prof. Robert Manne in his *Quadrant* piece sums up the Australian media's treatment of the affair:

"Mr. Hawke's decision to ban ministerial [Cabinet level, in U.S. terms] access to Combe on grounds of his dealings with the KGB triggered a series of Pavlovian responses throughout the media.

"Outrage at what was seen as the McCarthyist treatment dealt out to Combe roused the passions of the journalists. The Hawke-ASIO-Hope concern with national security left them cold. ASIO was seen to be staffed by 'Cold War warriors' whose worldview (because it suspected the KGB was up to no good) was 'conspiratorial' and 'paranoiac.'

"The KGB was given the benefit of

doubt and of ignorance. 'Cold War attitudes' toward the Soviet Union were, after all, impermissible. The KGB was not to be seen as the police arm of a totalitarian state. The word 'legitimate' attached itself more naturally to the KGB than the word 'sinister.' ASIO words like 'clandestine,' 'agent of influence,' 'recruitment' caused journalists to wince and snigger...."

The initial news of Prime Minister Hawke's instruction to his ministers to keep clear of lobbyist Combe was reported with extravagant indignation by almost all Australian journalists. Combe had been, in their words, destroyed, pilloried, traduced, liquidated, dynamited out of existence.

The supposedly conservative and up-market newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, editorialized that Combe's treatment had been "manifestly unfair." It was also a massive injustice and a monstrous injustice, other journalists wrote. On the taxpayer-financed, government-owned and Marxist-controlled Australian Broadcasting Commission, listeners were told that the KGB was just a "bureaucracy, made up of paper shufflers" and that the idea the KGB wanted to recruit agents-of-influence was a product of Cold War fantasy and propaganda.

In the beginning the Hawke government itself said little about the affair, which was fueled mainly by leaks from Combe himself. Combe was privately

informed of the charges and evidence against him, and an attempt was made by the government to keep the affair out of the news. But Combe took the offensive, leaking most of the news himself, to help him manipulate the way it was presented.

The media were at this stage intensely critical of the government for its secrecy. The government after a period of intense criticism and demands for the release of the evidence of Combe's wrongdoing, responded by putting out recordings of his conversations with the KGB officer, which was promptly denounced all round as a gross violation of Combe's right to privacy.

As Manne comments, the media were "hostile to the government on secrecy grounds when ASIO's evidence was not released and on civil liberties grounds when it was." Journalists played the classic double-faced game of tossing the coin while declaring "Heads I win, Tails you lose!"

Not a single Australian journalist penned a critical background article or comment on the KGB throughout the year-long Combe affair. Not a word on its record of espionage, forgery and disinformation, its historical role in providing the Soviet regime's executioners, bullyboys and torturers and its present role in promoting terrorism worldwide and crushing dissent within the USSR.

As Manne puts it: "In the Australian media the KGB appeared merely as a specter in the Cold War fantasies of ASIO."

The security intercepts showed that Combe promised the Soviets documents on supposed CIA activities in Australia and in return asked the Soviets to cooperate in providing access to Soviet material on the CIA to jour-

nalists of the *National Times* (a pro-Soviet weekly newspaper published in Sydney).

Combe assured the KGB's Ivanov in one intercepted telephone call that the two *National Times* journalists, Editor Brian Toohey and staff writer Marian Wilkinson (currently Washington correspondent) "want to really nail the Americans" in a film they were making on CIA atrocities. Not a single Australian journalist questioned the propriety of seeking such Soviet favors, or of relying on the KGB for information on the U.S. government.

In coverage marked by an extraordinarily monolithic line of pro-Combe, anti-Hawke reportage, there were other glaring omissions, Manne records:

"No journalist questioned the propriety of Combe's recommending to a commercial company that it gain trade favors in Moscow by becoming involved in funding Soviet propaganda outfits or his own plans to work for the 'upscaling' (harmonizing) of relations between the CPSU and the ALP.

"No journalist enquired what authorization Combe had from the ALP leadership for his discussions in Moscow concerning the 'upscaling' of relations with the CPSU. No journalist noticed that Combe had... given [KGB Officer] Ivanov details of an [Australian government] report made confidential only to keep it from Soviet eyes."

Further, Manne points out that there was a big ignored story from the Commission that Ivanov told Combe his brief to approach him about so-called trade came not from the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Trade but from Boris Ponomarev, head of the International Department of the Soviet Central Committee, who is in charge of programs of penetration, influence and

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active measures against the West. To have drawn attention to that link might have messed up the little story that Combe and the Soviets only had innocent "trade" and "good relations" in mind in working with Combe. Manne remarks that the Australian media would only have thought the ASIO interest in the Combe-Ivanov relationship justified if the Soviet officer had explicitly asked the Australian lobbyist to "spy" for them.

Manne expresses concern at the willingness of journalists "ostensibly reporting objectively, to campaign for Combe, to disguise from their publics what they were doing, and to strive consciously to shape public opinion on a question where issues of national security were concerned and where the reputations of the prime minister and of ASIO, as well as the reputation of Combe, were at stake."

The political scientist says the media mistreatment of the Combe Affair can only be understood as the latest chapter in a "long, complex and bitter struggle in Australia over attitudes toward the United States and the Soviet Union." It demonstrated the growing dominance in the Australian media of the formerly fringe leftist view of the U.S. as the major source of nastiness in the world.

In the Combe affair not only the leftist "push" in the media was campaigning on the side of the Soviet agent, but well-known centrists and free marketeers. Otherwise conservative organs of the media joined the regular mouthpieces of left-wingery to produce an extraordinarily harmonious symphony of pro-Combe and pro-Soviet propaganda.

Prime Minister Hawke was well justified in his comment that he had never before witnessed a more glaring case of unprofessionalism, bias and laziness from journalists. ■

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